



Honest Conversations about Youth Development and Education

On Please Speak Freely, Eric Gurna, Executive Director of Development Without Limits interviews leaders in the fields of youth development and education to shed light on key issues and explore different perspectives. The idea is to get past the platitudes and institutional positions, and have honest, nuanced conversations about things that really matter to young people and communities. Examples of

current and future Please Speak Freely guests are Alexis Menten of [Asia Society](#), [Earl Phalen](#) of [Reach Out and Read](#) (and Founder of [Summer Advantage](#) and [BELL](#)), [Dr. Pedro Noguera](#) of [New York University](#), [Karen Pittman](#) of the [Forum for Youth Investment](#) and [Carla Sanger](#) of [LA's BEST](#).

Episode #9: Alfie Kohn, October 25, 2011

[The original podcast with Alfie Kohn can be found here](#)

Eric Gurna: Welcome again to Please Speak Freely, this is Eric Gurna of Development Without Limits. Before we get into this episode's conversation I just wanted to say a couple words about the podcast. This is the ninth episode we're posting online, we have a few more recorded that haven't been edited and posted yet, and a few more conversations that have been scheduled to be recorded, so things have really been moving along, and we have a growing subscriber base on iTunes, more and more people have started checking it out, and I just wanted to reach out to the listening audience and ask if you're interested in the conversations and becoming a part of the conversation, to go into our website, www.developmentwithoutlimits.org, click on podcast, there's now a blog feature that's connected to the podcast, where a different writer each time writes a short piece, a personal piece, in response to the ideas in the conversation, and there's an opportunity there for you to go on and post your own comments, and be able to become part of the dialogue.

The strange thing about this podcast medium is that it's all output without much input, and given that I'm used to doing a lot of in personal professional development and seeing the looks on people's faces, and feeling the vibe in the room, it's very strange for me to sit in my office or wherever I am recording and not get any feedback from you, the listeners. So, drop me a line at ericgurna@developmentwithoutlimits.org, or go onto the blog and join the conversation, I'd love to hear from you and love to know if you have any suggestions for the podcast, any suggestions for people you think I should talk to, or things you think we should talk about, love to hear from you.

I'd also like to take this time to give a shout out to all of my colleagues out there in the field who have supported the podcasts through letting other people know about it, the Schools Out Washington Bridge Conference was the first sponsor of the podcast, and they have agreed to sponsor the podcast again for the Bridge Conference in October 2012, in Seattle, Washington, so thanks Zach Wilson and the Schools Out Washington for that. The Partnership for Afterschool education has recently agreed to sponsor the podcast for their Pacesetter Awards, so I'll be interviewing each of the Pacesetter Award winners, who are practitioners who have really shown excellence in the field, I'll be interviewing them for an episode of Please Speak Freely, and we'll also be recording live from the Pacesetter Awards event on March 1st in New York City, so if you'll be in the New York area and want to check out a great event in the field where they'll be honoring youth who are youth workers and afterschool programs, go to Partnership for Afterschool Education and you can get tickets to the Pacesetter Awards, and the other organizations such as the Afterschool Alliance, Park Action, Harvard's Pear Center, who have all be kind and generous in featuring the podcasts on their websites, tweeting about it, those kinds of social media, I really appreciate that, and appreciate those of you who have taken the time to figure out what a podcast is, if you needed to, and also to just listen to the conversations and to encourage us to keep doing this.

This episode is, to me, a very special episode of Please Speak Freely, one of my professional heroes is the author and speaker Alfie Kohn, and he was gracious enough, after me being somewhat persistent and pushy, to go on Please Speak Freely, and we had a great conversation, he has a lot of really grounded views and perspectives and opinions, and when I say grounded I mean he has a lot of research to back up his thoughts. So, take a listen and reach out and let me know what you think.

Eric Gurna: So I'm here in Belmont, Massachusetts with Alfie Kohn, author and lecturer. I want to welcome you to Please Speak Freely.

Alfie Kohn: Thank you.

Eric Gurna: Thank you. You can find out more information about Alfie's work at AlfieKohn.org. I was saying before we formally got started that I've been a huge admirer of your work, and more than that your work has really influenced my thinking and help me grow my perspective. Now, I'm seeing a whole new aspect of that, I have a young daughter, a 4 year old daughter, so your work has helped me shape my perspective in terms of my professional work with youth programs and with educators, and now I'm seeing, I'm feeling a totally different version of that as a parent. Especially the books "Beyond Discipline" and "Punished by Rewards", but for our listeners, Mr. Kohn is also the author of books like "Schools Our Children Deserve", and I believe the most recent book was "Feel Bad Education"?

Alfie Kohn: Yes, that's a collection of essays.

Eric Gurna: Yes, that's also great title. I'm often referencing your working my own work, and I've recently re-read "Beyond Discipline" and it's inspired me to revamp the work we do

around discipline. Maybe we'll have a chance to talk about that. But, before we get into anything, I was starting to say to you earlier, I don't set this up like an interview, so I don't have a list of questions, I do have some notes to work from. I wonder if you could say a little about what it is that you do, what is essentially your work.

Alfie Kohn: Well, I write and speak on a number of different issues having to do with education, parenting and human behavior, I have a special interest in pulling together research that ends up supporting positions that may seem surprising to people, on one level what I do is say to people "you say you want this" as a teacher or parent, so how come you're doing "that", when it turns out that logic and good values, and sometimes common sense, point in a very different sense from what have become common practice in schools and in families.

Eric Gurna: You said, about education, and also human behavior, that's a pretty broad idea.

Alfie Kohn: It is, well I'm interested in more than just, I started writing about all kinds of, I guess you could call them psychological issues, but often those with social implications. My first book looked at the destructive effects of competition in all areas of human life, at work, at school, at play, at home, and the whole notion of what it meant to have to engage in activities in which I can succeed only if you fail, and I drew from a number of different academic disciplines to uncover a lot of research showing that competition is inherently counter productive. Then I wrote a book about altruism and empathy, and the nature of human nature, and if you're familiar with "Punished by Reward", you know that my challenge to behaviorism, or succinctly the idea of "do this and you'll get that", is again not just about education or parenting, but about motivation and behavior and broader concepts.

Eric Gurna: And it seems to me that the perspective that you are coming from is not the perspective that many are coming from these days who are in positions of leadership in education.

Alfie Kohn: I feel that that is fair to say.

Eric Gurna: Do you think it's gone further in that direction in the last couple decades?

Alfie Kohn: Well, yes, I mean there's not just a single direction, there's a lot going on at any given time in education, and of course are we talking about elementary or secondary, public or private, are we talking about assessment, instruction, curriculum, there's a lot of different things going on. When you step back and look back at public policy issues relating to education, what you mostly see is a concerted push by public officials and corporate executives who usually don't know very much about how children learn to implement a corporate style, top down, heavy-handed, test driven approach to changing schools, which on some levels seems to be designed to undermine the whole institution of democratic public education, and beyond that, to turn back the clock to a model where the emphasis is on control, control by policy maker of educators, and of educators of

children, to get them to memorize facts and practice skills, so that they can become adequately skilled, docile future employees. The purpose of this whole approach to “school reform”, being not create a vibrant democracy, or do what’s in the best interest of children, but to ultimately pump up the economy. So, there are a number of individual strands that can be teased apart. I think anyone who’s knowledgeable about learning, anyone who’s committed to doing what’s in the best interest of kids, has to be very concerned about what’s been going on for, at least, 20 years, and is getting worse. A lot of us thought we had hit bottom at the end of the 90’s, because so many states had adopted very specific, prescriptive standards for what had to be taught, along with really bad tests to enforce those mandates. And then along came what should’ve been called the “Many Children Left Behind Act”, which ramped it up on a national level, forcing schools to test every kid, every year, from third grade to eighth and again in high school, with punishments for the schools that needed the most help, which did, and is continuing to do unimaginable damage to kids and to schools, particularly low-income kids. And we thought it couldn’t get much worse, and Obama has, with the help of the Gates Foundation and Arnie Duncan, has taken the Bush administration’s attack on public schooling to levels that we the Bush administration never dreamed could happen. They have taken that corporate approach to new levels, and it’s really an assault on public education. They’ve turned a number of schools all over the country into glorified test-prep centers.

Eric Gurna: And what’s happened with the Obama and Duncan administration with Race to the Top and all of that, I’m so eager to talk to you about so many things, and I feel like there’s a real connection between what you’re talking about now and the issues around discipline in the classroom and in programs, it reminded me, The Race to the Top model, of holding out new funding for states and schools and school systems that would apply for it, but in order to apply for it, in order to qualify to apply for it, you have to put a set of policies in place. So, it’s essentially a means of controlling the states and school districts of putting those policies into place more than it is a funding source. It reminded me of the movement from, a lot of people know that they want to move away from traditional approaches to discipline, and a lot of people, when we talk about that a lot of traditional approaches to discipline are essentially, when you look at them in their most essential way, it’s about getting kids to “shut-up and stand in line”, or “sit down and shut-up”, and that one of the things that really struck me about beyond discipline is that it’s not enough to simply phrase things in a nicer way, and speak with a nicer tone of voice, and turn “shut-up and sit down” to “refrain from talking and please take a seat”, or something, and the idea of moving from the stick to the carrot, or phrasing things in nicer way, putting things in a nicer package but not fundamentally changing the thing itself, I saw sort of parallels with Race to the Top, did you have that response when Obama...

Alfie Kohn: Well, I think there are several connections between what’s done in the name of discipline or classroom management, on the one hand, and public policy efforts to change education on the other. I’m not sure if Race to the Top was ever presented as a kinder, gentler version of what had preceded it, in fact it became...

Eric Gurna: More of a carrot, I mean it was presented in terms of a carrot and a stick...

Alfie Kohn: I see your point. I've been doing this for so long that I see rewards and punishments as two sides of the same coin, they're both ways of doing things to people, as opposed to working with people, but in another respect Race to the Top made what had come before even more vulgar and ugly because it turned it into a competition, which event he Bush administration hadn't thought to do, which is to set states against each other, saying that one can succeed only by triumphing over another, instead of trying to figure out a fair way to give all the states and their children the resources that they need. Second, it was more blatantly about top down control, you don't get those funds, or have a chance of winning this contest, where we've created an artificial scarcity, and turned every state into a rival for other states. You don't even have a chance of winning unless you obey us.

Then the third level of problem is what they were asking the states to do, the particular policy requirements, which is the ultra right-wing corporate agenda of a free market model of privatizing services when possible, of moving money away from democratic public schools, into quasi-private charter schools, making test scores count for even more, and compromising teacher's job protections, threatening to close down schools that need help, merit pay for teachers, you jump through these hoops and raise test scores if you want to earn more money, and so on. So, there are interesting connections between that and different models of discipline with individual kids. One is that schools are cracking down on more on individual kids and their conduct, precisely because of the pressure to raise test scores. So, what we're seeing, especially in the inner city, is an increasing criminalization of adolescent misbehavior, and expelling or suspending kids in part because it seems these kids may be low scorers. So there's that pressure to get rid of "bad kids" or the kids who aren't going to bring glory to adults who run the schools. And then there's the respect in which, and I don't think many people have commented on this, that if someone has a gun to your head and is saying raise test scores, or else, what kind of classroom do you create? Well, you don't create a classroom that's about discovery and exploration, you don't create a place where kids of different ages and abilities can figure stuff out together, and create a democratic learning community. You don't create a place that's intellectually vibrant, you create a place that's all about worksheets, where you have to memorize these facts and get better at the narrow skill of taking tests, which a lot of kids are good at who aren't very imaginative, and conversely a lot of kids aren't good at who have terrific brains. But, when you're creating a test prep environment, you need a place where kids comply, because understandable, most people who have a mind, resist taking time away from real learning to get better at scoring well on tests. And, that in turn leads to pressure to create more top-down discipline for kids to make them sit down and shut up with a variety of bribes and threats. So are all kinds of links, I've diverged somewhat from your original question which is about the idea of ostensibly kinder way of doing something, which has its analogue in the classroom and at the state and federal level. But, it's bad news on many levels

Eric Gurna: And so, lets get a little more into that, around the two sides of the same coin, the carrot and the stick, I'm working a lot in New York City where the mayor has initiated a program for paying kids for grades, I think maybe for test scores as well, I'm not sure, Jeff Canada, who is head of the Harlem Children's Zone, and a big advocate for a certain

model of charter school, and education reform right now has also very enthusiastically advocated for paying kids for grades. So this is something that we've been talking about a bit, and I had an interesting conversation with Karen Pittman of the Forum for Youth Investment where I raised this with her, and she said something that I'd like to quote to you, just wondering what you think about this, because she put it in a way that I hadn't really heard before. She said that "the market approach says that if you want people to change their behavior, pay them to change their behavior, the social psychology says that if you want them to sustain that behavior after you finish paying them, that you really have to use the limited time in which you're paying them for the behavior to really bring them into a space in which you reflect on their behavior, change their priorities, change their skills, and get rid of the barriers, so that when they come out the other end, they're going to stay on that path."

Alfie Kohn: Well, I think she has the first part right, in characterizing the economic or free market view, and I think she is unfortunately looking at a thin and outdated view of social psychology, if that's as far from that first view as she gets, in that field. Social psychology and educational psychology have actually grown beyond a focus on behavior per se, all good educators are not just interested in getting kids to act in a particular way. What she's offering as a choice sounds to me like a false choice, it's sort of like a stupid version of behavior control and a slightly savvier version of behavior control. Fortunately we're not limited to either of them, we're interested not just in the behaviors that can be seen and measured, short-term or long-term, but in the values and reasons and motives and the kids who have them. And that stuff is not just a matter of getting better at rewards or skill-building to sustain behaviors in a longer term, but engaging in a respectful and constructive way, with the kids themselves, and thinking about what learning is, and why kids behave that way or the other. What are their attitudes and goals, what does their perspective look like. And that requires us not merely to get better at the way we implement a policy like that, but to stop doing what research shows is counter-productive, among those tactics would be any kind of "doggie biscuit" that's offered to kids. Now in the case of paying kids for grades, you're talking about a reward for a reward. The best teachers don't give grades, much less do they give them a "doggie biscuit" for getting a good grades, which doubles the damage. I have an article coming out in the November issue of Educational Leadership which sort of updates some of the research and experience of why grades get in the way. So, when you hear people say, for example, "I don't believe in paying kids for good grades, they should just take pleasure in the grade itself," NO! The grade is part of the problem! An "A", just like a dollar, or a pat on the head and a patronizing "good job", or a sticker, all of these are extrinsic inducements that research shows undermine the intrinsic desire to learn. Now, parallel to the "paying kids for grades" stuff, the kind of mindless behaviorist way of manipulating kids which is disproportionately visited on kids of color in the inner city. That's not to say that affluent white kids aren't given stickers and behavior charts too, but the full strength concentrate of this kind of tendency to treat kids like pets is mostly visited upon kids with the least resources, which is why you don't really find the sort of "pay kids for test scores." Now, paying kids for test scores raises a question not only about means, but about the end. This is a bad way to accomplish a bad goal. So, on the one hand, there may be better ways to achieve that goal that don't involve the carrot and stick, but if the goal itself

is to raise test scores, that's not the same thing as helping kids to learn more deeply, and to love it. And conversely, I suppose you could try to use the bad means for a better goal like "paying kids to think more deeply". But, I think there's different versions, but we have to look at both separately.

Eric Gurna: You mentioned competition, and it's funny to talk to you in the middle of this particular day, because I'm attending a conference today here in Boston sponsored by the Nation Center for Time and Learning, and Harvard School of Education, and it's all about what they're calling "expanding learning time", "expanded learning time", "expanding learning opportunities", "extended days". The conference this morning, which was about six keynote addresses and three panels between 8:30am – 12:30pm, in one room, was mostly focusing on the idea that we need to have more time in the school day. I don't want to be unfair, there was a fair amount of talk about "it's not just about more time, it's about what we do with that time," but there was a lot of talk about "time", and there's a few notes that I took that I was eager to come to you and see what your response might be to some of these things. One of them had to do with what you mentioned about competition, in the course of saying something else one of the speakers mentioned that there's soon going to be over seven billion people in the world, that the world population is about to go up to seven billion, and that we need to prepare our kids to compete with all of them.

Alfie Kohn: Sure, after all what are other people for if not to defeat. What kind of way is that to raise and teach children, to look on everyone else as the potential rival whose face you have to step on to get ahead? I don't want my kids to compete in the twenty-first century, I want them to collaborate in the twenty-first century. Every time you see another ranking of international test scores where people wring their hands over the US being number twelve, instead of number one, put aside for a moment that this is about test scores, not about learning, but lets pretend that that's a useful indicator of learning, what we're saying is that we want kids who live in other countries to do poorly, and I find that intellectually and morally bankrupt. I want children in every country to succeed. But, the larger question, and I believe it's probably not a coincidence that the same people whose idea of school reform is to make kids do the same crap longer also are more interested in "winning" than in, say, "learning", or "caring." It's not say there's a perfect correspondence, there may be people who share my views about wanting to cooperate, or at least not wanting to have to defeat other people, who still believe the more time you force kids to spend on a task or at school the better they're going to do. Well, that's an empirical question, now we're not talking about value judgments, and the research very clearly shows that more time on task is not strongly correlated to better proficiency, unless the task is mindlessly simple. The simpler the task, the stronger the correlation between time and outcome.

When you start talking about understanding mathematical principles from the inside out, instead of merely memorizing algorithms, or when you're talking about reading for understanding instead of pronouncing words correctly, then there's almost no

relationship. I mean obviously you need a certain amount of time to do a task, but beyond that threshold, it doesn't really mean much. Now, look at it from the bigger picture, we're supposedly having all kinds of problems with our schools, why would you think that more time, more days in the year or more hours in the day would lead to any substantive improvement at all, especially since school is so profoundly alienating and un-engaging for so many kids, because of the continued traditional emphasis on worksheets and textbooks and lectures and quizzes and grades and homework. Why would you think that strapping them to a chair and saying "you've got stay till 5pm" or "you've got to through the summer" would do anything to address the fundamental problems we have with that, it's that "more of the same" or "intensification" stuff. I looked at this from another direction when I wrote a book about homework, it turns out that homework, certainly below the high school level, has absolutely no academic benefit, regardless of how much of it is assigned or how good it is, and even in high school, it's a dubious connection, making kids work a "second shift" when they get home from spending all day in school. It's not only off-putting to kids and causes them to lose interest in learning on many occasions, it has no apparent benefit, but it comes from that same corporate style simplistic sensibility that leads people to hold whole conferences, not about how to make school more engaging and meaningful and worthwhile, but how to make it last longer.

Eric Gurna: So what a lot these speakers would say, I think, is something like "in order to do more project based learning, in order to get deeper into things, in order to give language learners more time to practice, that you need more time, you need more time to do all of those things." The other argument that was being made that I thought was really confusing was that, it was said several times that we had to cut things like gym and music and art because there wasn't time, so if we add more time to the school day and school year, we can add those things back in. But, at some time there was time for those things, so where did we suddenly...

Alfie Kohn: No, we cut that stuff, A, because there wasn't enough money, or B, because of the pressure to raise test scores, and that stuff doesn't lead to higher test scores, or at least prove it does. But, this is a bargain with the devil. Most of the people who are pushing for longer school days, longer schools and so on, are the same people who talk about competitiveness, who talk about accountability or "raising the bar" more rigorous schooling, more corporate focus. These aren't the people who have been saying for years "if only we had another hour we could do rich, project based learning, interdisciplinary teaching." The Venn diagram has very little overlap between those two, and if the school year is lengthened, like they were pushing to do in Chicago, that's going to lead to more "drill-n-kill", there's no going to be better stuff. Apart from that, I just want to ask these people: how much is enough? If you were really serious about improving the quality of teaching and learning, and I mean in a meaningful way, I don't mean shoveling more facts to raise test scores and make the adults look better, I mean to really help kids be excited and proficient thinkers. How much time is enough? I got a bigger desk a couple of years ago, within two weeks the stuff had expanded to fill that "time" and I wanted a bigger desk. And, when teachers say "I have to give homework; I have to shove the burden over to the kids to make them do the stuff I can't figure out how to make them

do during the time allotted to me,” how much time would you need to have such that you would finally say “yea, that’s enough”?

Eric Gurna: Well, one of the founders, of KIPP Charter Schools was at this particular conference, and he was describing his school system and he said that his students go to school nine and a half to ten hours per day, then go home with some homework, and then come to school on Saturdays and over the summer too.

Alfie Kohn: He should be ashamed of what that does to children’s lives. This superficial criticism of KIPP schools is “that’s not scalable; you’re not going to be able to do that to enough kids and enough schools to make a difference from a public policy perspective,” so any gains they get are atypical and un-replicable. I wouldn’t send a dog to a KIPP school, the way they treat children. First of all, ask the basic questions about what makes for a great school, the kind you’d want to send your kid to. First, how much say do the kids have about what they’re learning? To what extent are they brought in on the decision-making? “How do we want our class to be?” If we need guidelines at a school level, kids learn how to make good decisions, by making decisions.

Let’s look at KIPP. Even the teachers have limited discretion about what they do. Number two, do they get the kind of great, again, interdisciplinary, team taught, student directed, project based learning, where the point is to understand ideas from the inside out, or is it all about showing better scores on bad tests? Third, when there’s a problem, do you work with kids to try to solve the problem, or do you bribe or threaten them to into mindless obedience? It’s about “work hard, be nice”, and “nice” you get the sense contextually doesn’t mean a compassionate, generous human being, it means “you do what you’re told, you obey authority without questions, or else we publicly humiliate you,” and conversely have a token economy program of the sort that was developed in mental institutions some years ago. The program itself at its core, is anti-child. The fact that they also believe that kids should be subject to it for more hours in the day and the week is unsurprising and more depressing. Are they able to pump up the test scores? I’m willing to stipulate that they can, a lot of people have challenged that, because they also cherry-pick the students and throw out the ones who aren’t going to make them look good. They say they don’t. I’ve read people who have example after example where they do, but let’s assume they don’t. Let’s assume you can turn a school into a factory, which is what this is, where you reward or punish students into doing exactly what they’re told, not questioning authority and becoming thinkers, and you make them stay there long into the night, sacrificing social, moral, emotional, artistic, physical development, all in the service of being socialized to comply with authority and get better at taking test. I am willing to grant that they can raise test scores. If they figured out a way to do this in the usual six hour a day, five day a week thing, I’d still find it horrifying, but the fact that they are sucking up a lot of these kid’s childhoods by demanding extra time adds insult to injury.

Eric Gurna: I had a conversations recently with someone who was not as familiar with education but had resources and wanted to support, and was curious to know different perspectives on KIPP and other charter schools, and when I described some of the critique I had, his response was “OK, I can kind of see that,” he said “my kid goes to a

private school where they call the teachers where they call the teachers by the first names and they've got these really intellectually engaging and rigorous projects, and they don't walk in a single file line down the hallway," he said "I can see that, but isn't it better than a lot of the schools in economically poorer neighborhoods that already exist, the sort of traditional school? Isn't it better to see the kids walking in a single file down the hall and chanting their math times tables and chanting the 'work hard be nice' slogans and all of that, then the alternative?"

Alfie Kohn: There are two alternatives for black kids in the inner city, the standard, traditional kind of schools, which has often neglected them and worksheets offered by a revolving core of burnt out teachers, versus "boot camp", where you get more worksheets by younger people who are more committed to the mission. To pose the question as those two alternatives is not only outrageous but it's racist. How come the kind of education that his kid gets doesn't become the model for kids of color? Since, as one person put it, progressive education is nice for affluent kids, whereas for poor kids it's essential, but we don't look at it that way. We say "compared to what they get." I'm not sure, I would hate to have someone to force me to choose, frankly. I am in no way romanticizing pre-NCLB schools in the inner city, or non-charter schools, which are appalling. It's no coincidence, just to cite one name you may be familiar with, a guy like Jonathon Kozol, who has been documenting the horrors of inner-city education, and the savage inequality of American schooling for so many years, joins me and so many others in being more horrified by KIPP and so many other of the charter school models that are imposed on kids of color in the inner city as sort of ratcheting up the damage. It's now a more systematic way of making sure that black kids and urban kids in general get a worse education than white kids, and the suburbs.

Eric Gurna: It seems to me that there's more of a debate about a fundamental world view than there is about all the tactics and the different reform strategies and this "kind of school versus that kind of school," it seems to me that a thread that runs throughout your work and what I hear in this conversation too, is that you said it's bad for kids. It's treating young people as pet-like pets, or treat young people like they're people you need to get to do things, or do things to, is essentially wrong. It's not just ineffective, but it's also wrong on some deeper level. It's hard to have that conversation in most of the arenas in which I work. When you start talking about the difference in world view, or a difference in the way that what we think is the right way to really approach this work, I don't get a lot of response, I don't feel like a lot of people want to talk about that there are fundamentally different views one can take.

Alfie Kohn: Well, there's no such thing as a value free education or parenting. There's only a conversation in which the values are invisible, and whenever they're invisible you tend to, by default adopt the values of the status quo. So, when you don't talk about this stuff, it's implicitly conservative, and perpetuates the things that we are already doing. So, there's always values present, there's always a goal, "what are you trying to do here?" I try to make that explicit whenever I speak to teachers or parents, usually the first thing I do in a lecture or workshop is to ask "What are your long term goals for your kids? How do you hope they will turn out? What do you hope they'll be like after they've left your class,

your school, your household?" It's interesting, I've done this in urban, suburban and rural environments all over North America. I've done it with teachers and administrators, elementary and secondary, and parents, public and private schools, and there's a remarkable degree of census. I've done this literally hundreds of times with tens of thousands of people, and I can tell you, you might be able to guess the list looks remarkably the same. People say "I want kids to be problem-solvers, good communicators, life-long learners, who are curious, creative, critical-thinkers. I want them to be happy, ethical, caring, independent, responsible." The same sorts of things show up all over. It's interesting that most of the items that show up, even with educators, have to do with the kind of people kids become, not just the kind of learners. So there's more "happy" and "ethical" and "responsible," but even when they look at intellectual issues, they tend to be "life-long learner" or "problem-solver" rather than "my long-term goal is for my kids to be able to convert a decimal into a fraction," nobody says that. So then I say to them, "is it possible that our practices are inconsistent with our goals? But, let's keep the goals in mind, because you say you want your kids to be 'this' 'this' and 'this', so why are you doing stuff that is likely to undermine those very goals? Here's the research showing that when you reward kids or praise them for being nice, they become a little more selfish, a little more focused on 'what do I get', even if it's just a pat on the head, and a little less concerned about people needs. If you're using grades, if you're assigning them homework, if you're excluding kids from decisions about what we're going to read next, here's the research that says they're less likely to become life-long learners." So values are very much present, so it's our job to bring them into the conversation. That doesn't mean we ignore the empirical stuff, it so happens that on the issues I like to talk about, it's like a double whammy for the people who want to perpetuate the status quo. The research shows that it isn't particularly effective in getting even their own goals, and in many cases some of the goals, or at least the values implicit in the practices, I think are deeply problematic.

Eric Gurna: In the workshops we do at Development Without Limits, we do the exact same exercise, so I've also had that conversation many many times. I was just in Burlington, Vermont on last Friday, doing a workshop, that we do call "Positive Discipline" but we started calling our workshops that before we knew that there was a whole series of books and official trainings called "Positive Discipline," they're actually called "Positive Discipline: How to work with kids and not be mean." But, in our "Positive Discipline" workshops that's one of the things that we do is have that conversation, what we say to wrap it up is, no one ever says "I want my kid to be obedient" or "compliant." People say "good citizen" and people say "engaged" and "cooperative" and all those, "reflective," and things that aren't just about being a radical change-maker. But, they never say "obedient" or "stand in line, walk in line." I started working in the field of afterschool, sixteen years ago, or something like that, and at the time I was working in an afterschool program that was really focused on providing an environment where young people could choose what they wanted to participate in, to choose what they wanted to learn, but also to be a part of sports and arts and community services, and all kinds of things. A very youth centered program, it's still like that, that's LA's best, it's in Los Angeles, it's still a program that really focused in that way. But I started to see, with twenty-first century community learning centers, at the federal level, and different parts of the way the afterschool movement was

coming together, I had this sort of nightmare vision. I started to write an article about it, and never did anything to publish it, but it was this almost post-apocalyptic story where a young person gets up seven in the morning and doesn't get out until eight at night, and then has to do more work. So we're starting to see a lot of those things actually happening now, and at this conference I was just mentioning today, I heard another level of it that I hadn't really heard before, and I wanted to run this by you too. They were talking about this particular school, I believe it was the principal or some leader at this school or school districts, they were talking about the need to start very young, practicing the sorts of academic skills that kids are going to need when they get older. So, I'm a little familiar with this because my daughter is in Pre-K and she gets homework. She's in Pre-K at the public school...

Alfie Kohn: It's outrageous in 5th grade, let alone Pre-K...

Eric Gurna: It's supposedly optional, but I'm pretty sure I know what the teacher's response is if they don't do it, it's coloring, and the teacher says "they love it, especially the ones with older brothers and sisters, they love it."

Alfie Kohn: "They love it now, we'll take care of that in short order..."

Eric Gurna: So, I've been seeing that a little bit. At a workshop I was at recently someone was saying, we screened "The Race to Nowhere" out in Seattle, Washington last week, and someone was saying that she picks up her seven year old daughter at gymnastics and takes her home, and that her daughter had texted her a list of vocabulary words and asked her to drill her seven year old daughter in the car between gymnastics and home because she had a spelling test the next day. But this, what I heard today, took it to a new level. She was saying that what they do at every level of the school is they have a system for teaching, I forget what she called it, not just reading, but engaged reading, and it was about reading the text closely, interpreting the text, being able to make a claim and cite evidence, and she said they do this at all level from Pre-K on up. So they're having conversations with four year olds about reading the text closely, interpreting the text, making their claim, and offering evidence. My daughter loves books, loves to read, just loves it. I can't imagine how quickly I could get her to stop loving books and stop loving to read.

Alfie Kohn: Oh yeah, that's a great way to do it. Well, there's several great ways. In fact I've written about this, I have an article called "How to create non-readers." It offers seven ways to destroy children's interest in learning. One of them is to reward kids, give them some prize for reading a book. A pizza, a t-shirt from the public library during the summer, etc. Another way is to give kids no choice about what they're reading. Third, is to turn it into work, where they've got little stickies and be thinking about meta-cognitive stuff going on, and write reports, answer questions, and so on that turns it into a chore. It would be enough to destroy anyone's interest in reading. So, the first question you ask is if your long-term goal is not just about skill development, and I think any educator will say, even if we disagree about some of the strategies, "I don't only want kids to read with a sophisticated set of decoding strategies or comprehension strategies, but I want kids to

like reading, I want them to be life-long readers.” Well, that is completely inconsistent with this, particularly at a young age.

The greatest predictor to kids who read not only with enthusiasm, but with skill, is to set them loose on books, so they pick books they want, and read as long as they want on their own time, without turning it into some sort of graduate seminar before the kids are barely out of diapers. This, what you’re describing, is almost a textbook example of what would be called developmentally inappropriate practice. I don’t like it even for older students, but here it’s developmentally especially inappropriate. And it gets close to something the “BGUTI” which is a stupid acronym for “Better Get Used To It,” which is how they justify a lot of stuff with little kids where there’s absolutely no intrinsic benefit, and it’s developmentally inappropriate. Homework, grades, standardized tests, competition. We say to them basically “this may be lousy, but people are going to do these lousy things to you later, so we have to prepare you for that by doing lousy things to you now.” When you lay bare what’s going on, it’s almost laughable. It’s like the Monty Python sketch of getting “hit on the head lessons”, which is excellent preparation for getting hit on the head later. But people, with a straight face, actually do this crap to kids.

Eric Gurna: There’s so many more things we could talk about, but there’s something sort of a little more personal for me I want to ask you. When I read your work, I have two responses that I keep having again and again. One is this sort of relief like “I knew it!” Like the “punish or rewards” book, I’ve always been uncomfortable with the stickers and the pizza parties and all of that stuff, and then you read that. I’ve never been able to articulate why I’ve felt wrong about that stuff, and then I have to keep re-reading it, because I can forget it, sort of instantly read it and then forget it. The other is the feeling like, the feeling like you’re seeing something that’s missing, rather than just critiquing what’s there, so, so much of what I have in the field and conferences and other articles is just talking about the current policies, the current practices, and talking about “could we do it a little better” and “is this better than this, is this a little better than that,” and what you’re often talking about, it’s like you said earlier, it’s not a choice between those two options, another world is possible. I’m just wondering, how do you practice thinking like that, how do you do that kind of work, where you’re able to uncover those things and show that there is something else other than the available options that are being presented to you.

Alfie Kohn: Well, you cheat, by learning what other options other people have figured out. The broader your exposure to different kinds of schools and societies and families, the more, if you’re open to what you’re seeing and hearing, the more you can let that fertilize your own thinking. So, you don’t have to come up with everything by yourself. So, if you, for example, just assume, that kids have to be segregated by age, they’re all in second grade, then they’re all in third grade, then they’re all in fourth grade, then you never stop to think about it. But, then the more schools you visit, you say “wait a minute, they’ve got seven, eight and nine-year olds together, what the hell? Why wouldn’t we?” How many forty-two year olds only spend most of their time with other forty-two year olds? It doesn’t have to be like this. The same is true for many other things that we just assumed you have to do, from grades and homework, to the notion that if a kid does something bad something bad has to be done to him. Why? Then you start to reason by

analogy. You see enough examples of this where you see there are other opportunities, other things that we are not doing that we could be doing that most people haven't thought of, and you say "well, if that's true here, then by extension, how can I think about this situation in front of me in a different way, and transcend the limited options that I've been presented with? What else could it be like?" And, you don't have to do that alone either, because you could do that in conversation with others.

Eric Gurna: Well, thank you so much for taking the time to do this, it's been a pleasure, and I really appreciate you being on Please Speak Freely, and more than that I appreciate the work you are doing in the world.

Alfie Kohn: I appreciate you saying that, good to talk with you.